

# Accommodating Learning Disabilities in the English Language Classroom

**Inevitably, English language instructors will encounter students with learning disabilities in their classrooms. However, researchers have found that ELT educators often lack sufficient training in inclusive teaching practices.**

In this webinar, we will:

- establish definitions for learning disabilities and inclusive classrooms
- examine supportive instructional options, such as universal design for learning, scaffolding, and peer-assisted learning strategies
- consider a variety of approaches that are beneficial for students with learning disabilities as well as their non-disabled peers



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# Jimalee Sowell



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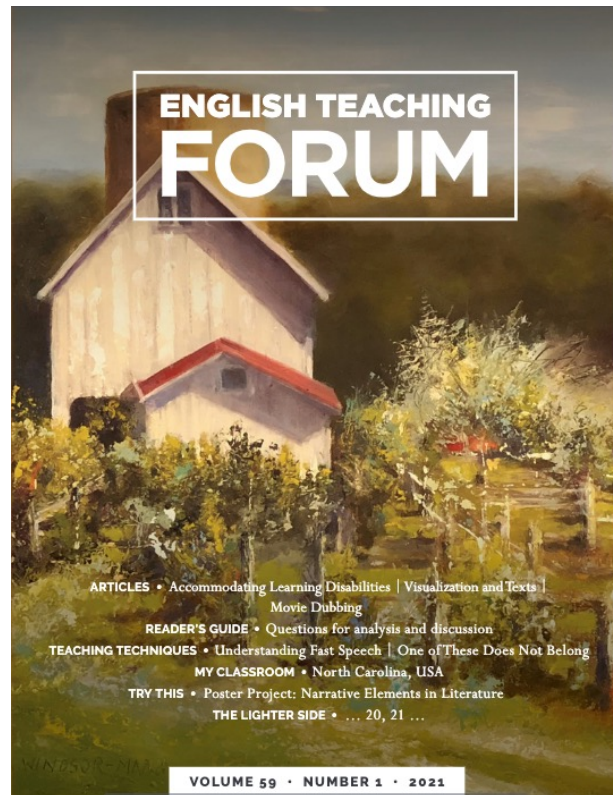
# Accommodating Learning Disabilities in the English Language Classroom



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# English Teaching Forum article



JIMALEE SOWELL AND LARRY SUGISAKI

United States

## Accommodating Learning Disabilities in the English Language Classroom

It is estimated that ten percent of learners have some sort of learning disability; on average, this is two or three students per classroom (Butterworth and Kovas 2013). This means that, inevitably, all English language instructors will encounter students with learning disabilities in their classrooms and could encounter students with learning disabilities in each class. In 2018, we, the authors of this article, conducted a pilot study on learning-disability training for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers. All the participants in our study had previously taught or were currently teaching English in EFL contexts. The majority of respondents in our survey (83 percent) indicated they were not confident about their abilities to assist students with learning disabilities. Among the study participants who had received training, the majority (52 percent) indicated their training had been relatively brief—lasting a day or less (Sowell and Sugisaki 2020). This article is a response to the need to provide more information about learning disabilities to English language teachers.

Learning disabilities are complex, and learning how to accommodate them is an ongoing process. We are not experts on learning disabilities. We are, first and foremost, English language instructors who, through our own experiences in various classrooms at various schools, recognize a lack of training and support for assisting English language learners with learning disabilities.

tools for helping English language learners with learning disabilities succeed in the English language classroom. The article first provides a definition of learning disabilities and the complexity in determining whether certain difficulties are the result of a learning disability or struggles with language acquisition. It then outlines the following methods of instruction that help support



# Our Learning Goals

Define key concepts

- Learning disability
- Inclusive classroom

Explore inclusive instructional strategies

1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
2. Scaffolding
3. Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)

**Throughout:** reflect on how to apply these ideas in our own classrooms



# Before we begin....

What have you done to help struggling learners in your classes?



# Defining Learning Disabilities

- No perfect definition
- Can be understood as “unexpected underachievement” (Fletcher et al. 2019, 4)
- Can affect ability to read, write, speak, spell, compute math, or reason + attention, memory coordination, social skills, and maturity (Burr, Haas, & Ferriere 2015, 3)
- Often categorized into groups of difficulties (Kormos, 2017)
  - difficulties with reading
  - difficulties concerning with written expression
  - difficulties with math
- **Literacy skill challenges** = most common learning disability (Klingner & Eppolito 2014)





# Inclusive Classroom

- Focuses on making schools **an effective learning place for all students**
- For students with disabilities, **inclusive education** means **access to the common curriculum** in the **general education classroom** (Bryant et al., 2019; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2017)
- Students with more severe disabilities might still need to be educated in separate classrooms or schools (Rapp & Arndt, 2012)

# Why Should English Language Teachers Be Concerned?

- Approximately **10%** of learners have some sort of **learning disability** (Butterworth & Kavas 2013)
- Learning disabilities are often **undiagnosed** (Taymans 2010)
- Educating students with disabilities in **inclusive classrooms is effective for all students**

(Bulat et al. 2017; Cole et al., 2004; National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2000; Rapp & Arndt, 2012 )





# What Can English Language Teachers Do?

**You are not expected to diagnose learning disabilities in your classes—ideally, diagnosis should be done by specialists**

(Farnsworth 2018; Lesaux and Harris 2013)

**You can implement teaching approaches that are good for all students, with or without disabilities**





## Quote

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“My disability exists not because I use a wheelchair, but because the broader environment isn’t accessible.”

– Stella Young, disability rights activist



# Teaching Approaches that Help All Students

1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
2. Scaffolding
3. Peer-assisted Learning Strategy (PALS)



# **1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**







# Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning is a **framework that addresses the variability of all learners**—with or without any kind of disability—to meet their needs. (Rapp 2014)

UDL Principles
Multiple means of <b>engagement</b>
Multiple means of <b>representation</b>
Multiple means of <b>action and expression</b>

# Multiple Means of Engagement

**Engagement** = motivation, interest

- Learners are **engaged** differently by different tasks and learning situations. (Rapp 2014)
- **Utilize different methods** of engagement
  - Have a **variety of interactional patterns** (pair work, group work, whole-class work, individual work) in a lesson.
  - Carry out a **variety of activities** in one lesson.





# Multiple Means of Engagement

What are some ways to provide multiple means of engagement?

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# Multiple Means of Representation (Input)

- Learners **differ** in how they **perceive** and **comprehend** information.
- There is a **greater chance of reaching all learners** when **input** is provided in **multiple forms**.

## **Example:**

Instead of only **reading** a dialogue, learners also **listen** to it. Learners might also write down new **vocabulary words** in a **notebook** and **draw corresponding pictures**.



## **Multiple Means of Representation (Input)**

What are some ways to provide multiple means of representation?


# Multiple Means of Action and Expression (Output)

- Learners **approach tasks differently** and **express** what they know in **many ways**.
- Provide students with some **choices** in how they **demonstrate** their **learning**.

## Examples:

- A. Allow students to **choose among several assignments**. If the topic is environmental issues, students can choose among various tasks, such as **writing a research report, creating a podcast, and compiling a photo essay**.
- B. Offer **a number of assignments to complete**, for example, four out of five.



A stack of four old, leather-bound books sits on a wooden surface. On top of the books is a pair of black-rimmed glasses. Behind the glasses is a white cylindrical container filled with many sharpened, multi-colored pencils. The background is a dark green chalkboard with faint, illegible markings. A large, white, torn-paper-like shape separates the image from the text on the right.

## **Multiple Means of Action and Expression (Output)**

What are some ways to provide multiple means of action and expression?

# Which UDL principle is it?

**Connect the examples (A-C) to the principles (1-3).**

1. Multiple Means of Engagement (interest, motivation)
  2. Multiple Means of Representation (input)
  3. Multiple means of Action and Expression (output)
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- A. The instructor has focused content on sustainable development. Students can choose the format of the project they want to complete for a final assignment (e.g., create a website, create a poster, and write a letter to the editor).
  - B. The instructor uses polls, break-out rooms, and a popular app in an online lesson.
  - C. The instructor provides content through a listening passage and its accompanying transcript.

# UDL Recap

**Universal Design for Learning** is an **overall framework** to inform the way we design and carry out lessons

For each lesson, incorporate

- Multiple Means of Engagement
- Multiple Means of Representation
- Multiple means of Action and Expression





# Our Progress

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~~Universal Design for Learning~~

Scaffolding

Peer-assisted Learning  
Strategies (PALS)



## 2. Scaffolding





# Scaffolding

An **instructional technique** in which an instructor or peer temporarily assists learners to complete a task successfully through a **step-by-step process** so that they will later be able to **complete the task alone**.

Scaffolding is a **successful technique** with English language learners with learning disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

(Santamaria, Fletcher & Bos 2002)



# Scaffolding Example 1

## No Scaffolding

“Write a paragraph.”

## Scaffolding

1. Analyze model paragraphs.
2. Share evaluation expectations with students.
3. Brainstorm ideas to write about.
4. Draft paragraph.
5. Get feedback.
6. Revise.
7. Submit final draft.





# Scaffolding Example 2

## No Scaffolding

“Listen to the passage.”

## Scaffolding - Before listening:

1. Activate schemata (connect to students' prior knowledge / personal experience)
2. Go over new vocabulary and expressions
3. Review relevant grammatical items
4. Provide an overview of the listening text. Let students know the listening activity's purpose
5. Let students know if there will be a task they need to complete while listening.



**Think of steps you might take in the following situation.**

**How would you scaffold...?**

an activity related to a one-minute video clip





**Think of steps you might take in the following situation.**

**How would you scaffold...?**

a project based on an environmental concern

# Our Progress

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~~Universal Design for Learning~~

Scaffolding

Peer-assisted Learning  
Strategies





### **3. PALS (Peer-assisted Language Strategies)**





# PALS (Peer-assisted Learning Strategies)

A class-wide peer tutoring reading program in which **higher-performing students** work with **lower-performing students** to carry out reading activities.

Research has shown that PALS has **improved the reading ability of students of all performance levels**, from low to high, including students with **learning disabilities**.

(Colón 2016; Fuchs, Fuchs, et al. 1997; Fuchs, Fuchs, Thompson et al. 2001; Saenz, Fuchs, and Fuchs, 2005; Simmons et al. 1995)







# PALS Guidelines

- Pair students in a way that they don't feel singled out

“Today, we will start with Nancy as the Coach and Tony as the Reader.”
- Change partners periodically



# PALS Guidelines

- Choose appropriate reading material at the learners' current level to suit your purpose:
  - a. general reading fluency
  - b. reading comprehension
  - c. vocabulary development
  - d. pronunciation practice
  - e. specific grammar focus, etc. (can be from textbooks or other materials)

# Guiding Coach Feedback

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Feedback should be **supportive** and **encouraging**

Help learners with feedback language:

- Can you read a bit slower/louder?
- I think you mispronounced this word. [points to word]  
Let's check the pronunciation together.
- Can you repeat this sentence/passage/word?
- Can you read that again?
- Great job on the first paragraph. I think you had a few mistakes in the second paragraph. Let's check together.



# PALS Activities

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## Partner Reading

- Variation: Paragraph Shrinking
- Variation: Prediction Relay





# Partner Reading

## **Roles:** Reader and Coach

The Reader reads aloud; the Coach listens and provides feedback

1. Higher-performing student is the Reader first. The lower-proficiency student (Coach) listens and follows along.
2. After five minutes, reverse roles, and the new Reader reads the same passage while the Coach provides feedback.



# Paragraph Shrinking (Summarizing)

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1. After reading, the Reader:
  - States the main idea
  - Provides a short summary of the reading passage (1-2 sentences)
  - Gives a recap of the most important details in the passage
2. The Coach provides feedback on the Reader's summary





# Prediction Relay

## (Text Prediction)

- **Before reading**, the Reader makes predictions about what is likely to happen in the next part of the reading passage.
- **After reading** the section of text, the Reader gives a short summary.
- The Coach determines whether the predictions were accurate.



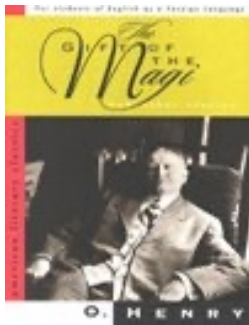
## O. Henry "Twenty Years"

The cop moved along the street looking strong and important. This was the way he always moved. He was not thinking of how he looked. There were few people on the street to see him. It was only about ten at night, but it was cold. And there was a wind with a little rain in it.

He stopped at doors as he walked along, trying each door to be sure that it was closed for the night. Now and then he turned and looked up and down the street. ....

**Prediction 1:**





## O. Henry "Twenty Years"

Then the cop suddenly slowed his walk. Near the door of a darkened shop a man was standing. As the cop walked toward him, the man spoke quickly.

“It’s all right, officer,” he said. “I’m waiting for a friend. Twenty years ago we agreed to meet here tonight. It sounds strange to you, doesn’t it? I’ll explain if you want to be sure that everything’s all right. About twenty years ago there was a restaurant where this shop stands. ‘Big Joe’ Brady’s restaurant.”

“It was here until five years ago,” said the cop. ....

**Analyze prediction 1 + Make prediction 2:**

# PALS

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What might you need to consider when preparing to use the PALS method in a reading-focused lesson?



# Our Progress

~~Universal Design for Learning~~

Scaffolding

~~Peer-assisted Language Strategies~~





# Let's Recap

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- ~10% of all learners have a learning disability
  - Inclusion has shown successful outcomes for both disabled students and non-disabled peers
1. **Universal Design for Learning** is a framework that addresses the variability of all learners
  2. **Scaffolding** helps students in a step-by-step process that moves them toward independence
  3. **Peer-assisted Learning Strategies** allow students to support one another through reading activities





# Action Plan

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What ideas from this webinar do you plan to implement in your classes this term?



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# Thank you!

## Questions or concerns?

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# Reflection Questions

1. Which ideas from today's session can you adapt or adopt in your teaching practice to create classroom learning environments that are more inclusive?
2. What aspects of Universal Design for Learning do you already include in your teaching? Which might you want to add to your teaching toolbox?
3. What scaffolding or student preparation might you need to consider before implementing PALS or other peer-supported learning techniques in your classroom?



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